



Spatial Economics Research Centre

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Victory for Neighbourhood Plans (sort of ...)

Residents of Thame, in Oxfordshire, have voted yes to their neighbourhood plan (the first of two areas to do so - the other is St James near the Centre Exeter).

Is this a victory for neighbourhood planning? Yes, [according to Don Foster MP](#) (minister for localism): "After all Neighbourhood Planning is part of the Liberal Democrat agenda; one of the new community rights introduced by our Government to give people more say over their area and putting communities in charge of setting out the homes, shops and amenities they want". Looking at the details of the Thame's plan, the surrounding debate a the referendum outcome it's hard to disagree with (most of) that assessment. Faced with unpopular plans for 775 homes all on one site, Thame Town Council have come up with a plan that uses a number of dispersed sites and that was supported in a referendum (by a 76% vote on a 40% turnout). You can gripe about the turnout (and there may be local political details of which I am completely ignorant) but taken at face value that looks like giving communities more say over the location of homes, shops and amenities.

That said, this is only a partial victory. If, as Don Foster suggest, this is about putting communities in charge or setting out the homes, shops and amenities that *they want*, then I think Thame Town Council might beg to differ. After all, the 775 home figure was *forced* on them by South Oxfordshire, they appealed against this total, lost and then had to come up with a plan to meet the total imposed on them (this is, of course, how neighbourhood pla are supposed to work). Whether the resulting housing is something they 'want' certainly seems open to interpretation.

Will this do much for affordability? [Don Foster](#) implies so: "In both cases plans by local people to *boost* house building in their areas were approved" (n emphasis). I don't see this - in Thame at least - where the neighbourhood plan makes zero difference to the number of houses that are planned to be built in the area between now and 2027. Will 775 new homes be enough to do much about affordability? Given Thame's population of around 11,000 that equates to about 10% population growth over a 14 year period (being generous - I've no idea what happened while all this planning was taking place). That's unlikely to do much for housing affordability in Thame or for housing affordability more generally if most neighbourhood plans (if passed) stick to the limits imposed by higher level authorities.

It's good that neighbourhood planning has ended up allowing the residents of Thame more say over where housing will go in their local community. But let's not exaggerate the benefits either to local communities in terms of building the housing they *want* or to housing supply in terms of increasing the total number of homes.

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Thursday, May 09, 2013](#)



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